



Development of a New Primary School English Curriculum and Textbooks in Myanmar

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Development of a New Primary School English Curriculum and Textbooks in Myanmar

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Abstract

This article reports on the design and implementation of an innovative primary EFL program in Myanmar. Begun in 2014, the program is part of the CREATE Project, a joint initiative between the Myanmar Ministry of Education and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The project has involved the planning, designing and implementation of a new curriculum for primary school English, along with concurrent materials development and the design of both pre-service and in-service teacher training courses. To give an insight into this multifaceted process, this paper focuses on the development of the Grade 3 textbook and compares it to the former book. After this analysis, it considers teachers' needs and the challenges they face through analyzing posts and comments made on the "New Curriculum English Subject" Facebook page. Teachers' primary challenges were learning the new textbook language, incorporating the recommended instruction into their established pedagogical approaches, and time management. The challenges and solutions outlined in this article have both policy and pedagogical implications for curriculum innovation at the primary EFL level, particularly with respect to the issues facing less economically developed countries.

Keywords: Myanmar, Primary school English, Curriculum reform

Myanmar and Primary School Education

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is the largest country in south-east Asia with a population of approximately fifty-five million. It is an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation, home to approximately 135 ethnic groups speaking 117 different languages (Lewis *et al.*, 2016). Myanmar is the official language and spoken as a first language by about 70% of the population. However, diglossia in the form of differing standards of spoken and literary Myanmar presents a major challenge for school children from minority ethnolinguistic groups. In school, they learn a literary variety which is

distinct from the spoken Myanmar/Burmese language they need to communicate with members of other ethnic groups (Bradley, 2016). For these children, English represents a third, 'foreign' language with all the additional challenges that learning it entails. Hence, curriculum development in primary education must account for a significantly diverse and multilingual student population.

Compulsory education is conducted throughout Myanmar with the vast majority of primary school aged children attending state-run schools. Currently, primary education commences at the age of six and lasts five years. Secondary schooling is divided into lower and upper, the former being four years long and upper secondary being two years long.

Until recent reforms, education in Myanmar has been underfunded and neglected (Steinberg, 2013). While data on education in Myanmar is often limited and out of date, official figures show that primary education has a 98% intake rate (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, student completion rates belie the positive enrollment figures: Only 70% of students graduated from primary school, and by the first year of lower secondary school, only 50% remained enrolled (Hayden & Martin 2013). The Ministry of Education (MOE) attributed these underwhelming completion rates to a poor-quality learning environment – it has been estimated that about half of the primary schools include multi-grade classrooms with teachers responsible for more than one grade at a time. Compounding these problems are a lack of resources and an outdated teacher-centered pedagogy with an overemphasis on rote learning and memorization (MOE, 2015). In 2016 the government enacted a National Education Strategic Plan to reform all levels of education in Myanmar. The plan promised free primary school education and outlined significant changes in the overall primary curriculum. Children are supposed to learn '21st century skills' and teaching in all subjects is now based on a 'Child-Centered Approach' (CCA) (MOE, 2015).

A Child-Centered Approach in Myanmar Primary Schools

The CCA approach to education focuses on the needs of the learners, rather than the teachers. Rather than what is taught, the focus is on what and how children learn. Learning is conceptualized as both an active process for the individual student and an interactive process between students constructed through social activity (Chung & Walsh, 2000). It should be emphasized that CCA is a philosophy, not a methodology – with the result that there are many different approaches and no one classrooms applying it will look the same. For sample case studies of the CCA in practice, see Thailand (Chantarasombat, 2009), India (Anadalakshmi, 2007), and Bangladesh (Hamid & Honan, 2012).

According to Lall (2011), CCA was initially instigated in Myanmar by UNICEF and JICA at the end of the 1990s. Projects were begun in the monastic schools across Myanmar before being formally adopted by the MOE in 2004 (JICA, 2014). The results of this shift to CCA were primarily positive. Children were seen to be more engaged and happier to come to school. Parents emphasized how children were excited by the prospect of going to class in the morning. Teachers mentioned fewer absences and drop-outs as proof that children were more motivated to continue their studies (JICA, 2014).

Like any major educational reform, there were also challenges. Teachers and teacher-trainers noted that the successful enactment of CCA required a lot more preparation. There were also concerns about classroom time management as teachers felt that they could not necessarily cover the required lesson in the time allocated, especially in classrooms with too many students (Lall, 2011).

With these challenges in mind, and to facilitate the implementation of the new curriculum, in 2014 the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education (more commonly known as the CREATE Project) was jointly initiated by JICA and the MOE. The project's goals are to develop new curricula, textbooks, teacher's guides, and means of assessment for all primary school subjects (JICA 2019), all of which are designed to accommodate a CCA. Related aims include the redesigning of pre-service, undergraduate teaching programs in the country's twenty-five national Education Colleges and conducting annual training programs for in-service teachers.

The Primary EFL Curriculum

According to Brown (2015), curriculum development includes determining goals, content, sequence, procedures, and assessment. The primary school English Curriculum Development Team (CDT) has tried to reconcile empirically proven teaching practices for teaching English to young learners with a pedagogical approach that is appropriate for the social context of Myanmar. However, as Myanmar has 135 ethnic groups with a large number of children who do not speak the official language of Myanmar (Aung, 2019), it should be acknowledged from the outset that a single curriculum cannot meet the needs of all school children. In addition, the differing resources available to local governments, educational authorities, schools, and teachers necessitated developing lessons, textbooks, and teaching approaches that could minimize such disparities. Finally, the new curriculum has to balance innovation with tradition. Established English language teaching at the primary level in Myanmar is based on a teacher-centered transmission method (Hardman, Stoff, Aung & Elliot, 2016). Although the new curriculum focuses on a CCA that emphasizes English for communication, it still has to take into account teachers' experiences and expectations as to what constitutes classroom teaching. If the curriculum is too unfamiliar, many teachers may refuse to adopt it.

The Primacy of the Textbook

In both developing and developed countries, primary EFL teaching and learning is firmly focused on the textbook (Garton & Graves, 2014). A pedagogically appropriate textbook provides essential support for teachers in lesson preparation and in-class methodology as well as information on various aspects of the target language. For students, textbooks can be motivational in representing clear learning objectives and tasks to be undertaken and mastered (Brown, 2015). As Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) note, in many contexts, materials—usually in the form of a coursebook—act as the *de facto* curriculum, influencing both what is taught and how it is taught.

In the context of Myanmar, where students' exposure to English is limited, the textbook plays a significant role in the affordances for language learning. This situation mirrors that of other Asian countries; the primacy of the textbook results from both a desire to localize the content to better motivate students, and the need to provide a pedagogical 'how to manual' for the many primary school teachers who are teaching English for the first time (Widodo *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the textbook (and accompanying teacher's guide) is tasked with providing language instruction, methodological guidance, linguistic information and background information on cultural issues, and can often function as the teacher's only source of professional development.

For the CREATE Project, textbooks, teacher's guides, and related instructional materials are created by subject teams comprised of Myanmar primary school teachers, officials from the MOE, and faculty from both colleges of education and national universities. JICA

also provides specialist advisors for each subject which, in the case of English, are the authors of this paper.

Curriculum Objectives

The CDT established curricular objectives for English using the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Although CEFR was developed for and initially implemented in European countries, its descriptive scales (A1 – C2) are used widely by countries outside of Europe as a means of determining expected foreign language proficiency at different levels of formal education (Enever, 2018). For example, Vietnam has set the target level for children completing primary school as A1, while Colombia has mandated a level of A2 (Peña Dix & de Mejía, 2012). Similar to Myanmar, Thailand has made the CEFR descriptors the key principles underlying their adoption of a communicative approach to primary and secondary English language learning (Savski, 2019). In Japan, CEFR has been used to set learning standards for the junior and senior high school English curriculum and English teacher education (Tono, 2013). The primary appeal of the CEFR is that the assessment constructs on which the scales are based are easily understood. This enables the scales to be adopted and, where necessary, altered by countries for their own specific contexts. Another appeal is that CEFR is methodologically neutral. It does not stipulate how languages should be taught; rather, it emphasizes the acquisition of overall communicative proficiency.

North (2014), one of the original developers of CEFR, emphasizes that the scales are designed to be a general reference from which educators can create their own contextually appropriate objectives and methodologies. Thus, the English subject team, in designing the English curriculum were guided by the CEFR as a means of referencing internationally accepted descriptors but revised them so that they would be appropriate for primary schools in Myanmar. In addition, the CDT also referred to other national curricula, notably Thailand, Singapore, and Japan, in order to have comparative criteria for designing the new English curriculum.

As noted above, a considerable challenge was marrying innovative curricular approaches with well-established teaching methodologies and materials. An example of the extent of the proposed changes can be seen in a comparison between the former and new curricular objectives for Grade 3 (G3). Objectives and a note written in the preface of the old textbook are written below (MOE, n.d.)

All pupils must be taught and trained to be able to:

- *read aloud with correct pronunciation and correct stress, rhythm and intonation, and comprehension.*
- *develop clear, well-formed and fluent handwriting.*

Note:

- *Reading aloud should be done at this stage.*
- *Should pay constant attention to the teaching and training of handwriting.*
- *Do the given exercises orally several times before asking the students to write.*

The former G3 curriculum focused on accurate pronunciation and penmanship and did not mention the communicative functions of the language. In contrast, the new objectives for G3 are designed to give students real-world skills in using English. The objectives are divided into three main strands: listening and speaking; reading and writing; and language (incorporating grammar and vocabulary)

The first two strands are sub-divided into more skill-specific objectives that stipulate what students should be able to accomplish in English in certain communicative situations. To choose appropriate skill specific objectives, a list of 550 sample can-do statements were extracted from a 2016 version of the Council of Europe's Collated Representative Samples of Descriptors of Language Competencies Developed for Young Learners (2018). These were categorized and consolidated until there were six skill-specific objectives for listening and speaking, four for reading, and five for writing. The language strand consists of a list of grammatical items and lexical topics to which children will be exposed. Table 1 below shows the objectives or items to be learned for each strand in G3.

Table 1. Grade 3 Objectives.

Grade 3 Objectives			
Listening and speaking strand			
Listening		Speaking	
L1	Can get key information necessary for everyday life such as numbers and times, and provided they are delivered slowly and clearly.	S1	Can give information to others that is used in everyday life (e.g., time, numbers)
L2	Can understand dialogues about familiar topics (e.g., occupations, likes and dislikes) encountered in everyday life, provided that they are delivered in slow and clear speech.	S2	Can participate in simple conversation about familiar topics (e.g., occupations, likes and dislikes, etc.) encountered in everyday life.
L3	Can understand short stories, rhymes, and songs which have familiar words and are read slowly and repeatedly.	S3	Can recite rhymes and songs or act out stories that appear in the textbook.
L4	Can understand descriptions about objects, places, or what people are doing.	S4	Can give simple descriptions about objects, places, or what people are doing.
L5	Can understand directions.	S5	Can give directions.
L6	Can understand school timetables or plans (e.g., school trip plan).	S6	Can convey information for school timetables or plans (e.g., school trip plan).
Reading and writing strand			
Reading		Writing	
R1	Can read for specific information (e.g., quantity and time).	W1	Can copy key information about numbers and time.
R2	Can read longer texts such as monologues, dialogues, stories, songs, etc. after they have heard the teacher read it and have practiced it.	W2	Can copy words, phrases, or sentences which are part of a text such as a description, dialogue or story.
R3	Can read texts of 3 to 5 sentences provided that they contain familiar words, phrases, or sentence structures.	W3	Can write a series of their own original sentences about a topic provided that they have a model for writing given by the teacher.
R4	Can read and understand tables or charts about schedules or plans.	W4	Can write 3 to 5 of their own original sentences about a topic (e.g., My friend) using the words, expressions and sentence structures they have learnt.
		W5	Can write information into timetables or charts.
Grammar		Language	
Be verb, Demonstrative adjectives (this & these), Imperatives (& negatives), Infinitive (want to + verb), Prepositions, Present continuous, Present simple, Pronouns (they, we), There is/are, Verb tense aspects (1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular/plural, interrogatives, negatives)		Actions, Animals & pets, Colors, Daily activities, Family & friends, Likes & dislikes, Local areas & places, Objects in the house/school, Numbers (1-100), Occupations, One’s talents, School subjects, Shapes, Time, Timetables, Vegetables	

In adapting the CEFR scales for the new curriculum, the English subject team has focused on communicative outcomes that incorporate the four skills of speaking, listening,

reading, and writing. In the G3 Teacher's Guide these outcomes are specified by unit and outline what students should be able to do in English after the completion of each unit (see Table 2 below). The skills stipulated in the Grade 3 curricular objectives are designed to help students accomplish the communicative outcomes for each unit. Overall, the new curriculum is broader in its intentions, incorporating both the learning and use of English. However, the exclusion of skills familiar to teachers (e.g. accurate pronunciation when reading aloud and penmanship), and the addition of a variety of new skills designed to realize communicative outcomes is likely to cause confusion unless teachers receive the appropriate training and support.

Table 2. Grade 3 Student Outcomes.

Unit	Outcomes (Students should be able to ...)
1	communicate information on their family, friends and themselves.
2	communicate information on their favorite food, sport, games and subjects.
3	communicate information on things in their house including pets.
4	use numbers and shapes in communication.
5	communicate information on things they do at home and at school.
6	tell time and communicate information on their daily activities.
7	communicate information on their free-time activities and hobbies.
8	give and understand directions for places and locations.

Textbook Content and Methodology

In this section, we will compare the differing contents and methodologies of the current and former G3 textbooks. The former G3 textbook had eighteen lessons, with each lesson consisting of between three to eight periods. The majority of the lessons focused on a discrete linguistic form, primarily grammatical. The new textbook, on the other hand, is organized into themes that students can relate to. There are eight units with eight periods in each unit. After every two units there is a review section (two periods) for students to consolidate what they have learned. Each review section is then followed by a project (three periods) which enables the students to expand their use and understanding of the reviewed language in a creative and engaging way. Figure 1 below shows an excerpt from the G3 table of contents in the previous textbook and the complete table of contents from the current textbook.

Previous G3 Textbook			Current G3 Textbook		
No.	Lesson	Teaching Periods	Unit	Unit Title	Teaching Periods
1	Lesson 1 It is	4	1	Family, friends and I	8
2	Lesson 2 He/ She is... I am/ You are ...	4	2	My favourite	8
3	Review exercises	2	Review 1		2
4	Lesson 3 This is ...	3	Project 1 My family tree		3
5	Lesson 4 This is ... and this is ...	3	3	My house and my pets	8
6	Lesson 5 my, your, his, her	6	4	Numbers and shapes	8
7	Lesson 6 What is this?	3	Review 2		2
8	Review Exercises 2	3	Project 2 Things in my bedroom		3
9	Lesson 7 What is it ...? Is it ...? Is this...? Is he/she...?	4	5	Things I do at home and at school	8
10	Lesson 8 Yes, it is. No, it is not. Are you...? Yes, I am. No, I am not	4	6	My day	8
			Review 3		2
			Project 3 The daily activities of my friend		3

Figure 1. Contents of the Previous (left) and Current (right) Textbooks.

As indicated by the lesson titles in Figure 1, the methodology of the former G3 textbook consisted of students practicing and mastering predominantly grammatical features of English. In the current textbook the teaching methodology varies depending on the lesson types, which are shown below:

- *Language focused lessons*
- *Skill focused lessons*
- *Review lessons*
- *Project lessons*

Language-focused lessons introduce new language in a Presentation, Production, and Practice method. Students learn new words and expressions through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. The *skill focused lessons* are the fourth and last lesson of a unit. Students use all four skills to practice the language they learn in the unit. Activities include reading stories, drawing pictures, listening to songs, filling in blanks, and writing simple directions. Following every two units, there are two review lessons where students revise and consolidate the language they have learned. There is also a self-assessment activity enabling students to evaluate how well they can use the unit language in communicative situations. This is then followed by the *Project* lesson which follows a 'learn – do – present' approach over three periods.

Development of the English curriculum was influenced by what is termed the 'principled communicative approach' (Arnold & Dörnyei, 2015). Such an approach represents a necessary compromise between established 'traditional techniques' such as oral repetition and handwriting practice, and innovative communicative activities for conveying information. The current curriculum attempts to retain the teaching methods that were valued in the old curriculum while emphasizing meaningful oral and aural communicative activities.

Methodology

The previous sections have described the differences between the current and former G3 English curricula. The researchers sought to identify the types of challenges teachers were facing in adapting their instruction to the new curriculum in order to propose ways to assist classroom teachers. To gain an insight into teachers' reactions, we analyzed teachers' posts and comments on the *New Curriculum English Subject* Facebook page. The aim of this Facebook (FB) page is to provide guidance and advice to primary school teachers experiencing difficulties with teaching the new curriculum.

The page was started in May, 2017. As of July, 2019, the administrators of the page (members of the CDT) had written 220 posts and received 3,333 comments. For this paper, the researchers analyzed two main issues:

1. What types of posts have the Facebook page authors put online to help teachers and, of these, which have been the most viewed?
2. What kind of support do teachers request in their comments?

Answering both of these questions will help to determine the types of challenges the teachers are facing.

Participants

The FB page is administered by members of the curriculum development team. The administrators' job is to post content and reply to comments or private messages from teachers seeking help. The administrators have given the researchers access to the page statistics. All posts and comments are written in Myanmar, a language, unfortunately, in which both researchers have no literacy. Therefore, the administrators have also translated posts and comments from Myanmar to English for the authors. Because the administrators were involved in both translation and analysis, along with their professional interest in the results of our analysis, they are best thought of as both research participants and co-researchers. In doing this the Myanmar administrators were "also able to offer their own interpretation of [the foreign] researcher's findings ... thereby giving voice to the community or group that is being researched" (Given, 2008, p.599).

As of September, 2019, the FB page had 76,423 followers, 71,300 of whom live in Myanmar. 83% of the followers are between 18 and 34 years old, with 70% being female and 30% male. There is no qualifying criteria or approval necessary to become a follower. Although there is no exact data available on the occupations of the page followers, the male to female ratio is similar to that of primary school teachers in Myanmar of 83% (The World Bank, n.d.). Any follower of the page can submit a post in the community section, or comment on an administrator's post. Those making comments on FB are sharing them with their online community of over 76,000 people, but not necessarily to those outside of the community. For this reason, the researchers have excluded potentially revealing information about the personal identity and job location (school) of the Facebook user when quoting comments. Furthermore, links to specific posts or comments that are quoted will not be revealed. Lastly, no screen shots of posts will be provided. The purpose of this is to ensure the anonymity of the FB commenters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Posts by the page administrators and reader comments related to G3 were exported into the qualitative data analysis program NVivo (Version 11). Posts were categorized based on

their purpose: to provide resources, to initiate a forum, and to provide background information about the G3 curriculum. Teachers' comments were analyzed using applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). A theme was assigned to each comment and these themes were categorized. Lastly, a representative comment for each theme was chosen. To determine which kinds of posts received the most attention from teachers, the researchers used the criteria of: *People reached*; and *Engagements*. The former refers to the number of people who viewed the post. The latter refers to the number of people who engaged with the post by either clicking on a picture, video or link, writing a comment, or reacting, e.g. 'liking' a post.

The comments were considerably challenging to analyze because of their vast number. In addition, many comments consisted of emojis, indecipherable abbreviations, or indicated approval of a previous comment. Therefore, the researchers decided to analyze the longest comment threads of those posts that received a high number of comments in order to determine the types of support teachers needed.

Findings

There were 34 posts about G3 written by the administrators; these were grouped into two broad categories: *G3 Overview and Principles* and *Support for G3 Units and Lessons*. In the first group, there were seven posts. These were concerned with the introduction of the G3 curriculum, the syllabus, and lesson types. Posters also discussed the overall primary school reform initiative. Table 3 provides an overview of the statistics for each post. The category 'Medium' refers to how the administrators conveyed the information, either in written or audio-visual form. Posts are ranked by their level of 'Engagement'; that is, the number of people who reacted to, shared, or commented on a post.

Table 3. Content of G3 Overview and Principles.

No.	Content	Medium	People Reached	Engagement
1	Talk show about the new curriculum	Video	36,896	7,504
2	Syllabus	Written	20,092	1,752
3	Different types of lessons	Written	15,470	1,574
4	Features of the new textbook layout	Written	12,052	1,452
5	Overview of curriculum	Written	13,461	1,196
6	Curriculum and Textbook PR Video	Video	9,665	788
7	Curriculum and Textbook PR Video	Video	5,299	521

The post with the most engagements was a video excerpt from a televised talk show on Myanmar's national broadcaster MRTV discussing the new primary school reforms. A university professor discussed the main points of the English curriculum in this video which also had other guests discussing other subjects.

Extract 1: Main points about the “New Curriculum English subject” as explained on MRTV.

1. The new English curriculum has been developed to incorporate the teaching of all four skills and thus the teaching approach has been changed.
2. It is now necessary for teachers to conduct proper teaching in order to teach the new curriculum effectively. Therefore, we (the universities of education) are conducting teacher training every year in collaboration with the Myanmar Ministry of Education.
3. The teachers have to follow the teaching steps in the Teacher’s Guide when teaching under the new curriculum.
4. The new curriculum will not benefit students if the teachers ask them to learn things by heart and don’t change their pedagogical approach.
5. Teachers won’t have difficulties if they follow the teaching steps on how to implement the correct teaching approaches.
6. It is hoped that students will achieve the expected curricular goals for each grade if the teachers are doing the proper teaching using the correct teaching approaches.
7. In this way, it is hoped that students will ultimately be able to communicate in English when they graduate from high school.

This message is significant for several reasons:

- It details some of the primary points of the new English curriculum, particularly how the process of learning is going to change (Points 1 and 2);
- It emphasizes how students do not need to learn everything by heart (Point 4);
- And it highlights the importance of teacher’s making proper use of the teacher’s guide (Points 3 & 5).

Although the video extract itself generated little discussion on the Facebook page, the three issues highlighted above are prevalent in teachers’ comments which will be discussed later.

Overall, the number of engagements show that for a page with 76,000 followers, the Facebook posts to do with the principles of the new curriculum received modest attention. However, the second category of post, *Support for units and lessons*, of which there were 27 posts made by the administrators, received much more engagement. These posts consisted of audio files of textbook songs or dialogues, video files of lessons, or written guidance on how to do lessons. These posts arguably offered teachers immediate help. Table 4 shows the list of posts included in this category, the number of people reached and their level of engagement.

Table 4. Support for G3 Units and Lessons.

No.	Content	Medium	People Reached	Engagement
1	Unit 2 Song	Audio	115,263	33,494
2	Language focused lesson	Video	157,339	33,436
3	Whisper game	Video	156,454	31,536
4	Pointing game	Video	88,655	20,177
5	Unit 7 Song	Audio	73,254	17,796
6	Unit 1 Lesson 1 Expressions	Audio	75,368	17,692
7	Unit 2 Lesson 1 Vocabulary	Audio	61,532	16,523
8	Unit 1 Lesson 4 Story	Audio	71,523	16,370
9	Unit 1 Lesson 2 Vocabulary	Audio	64,122	13,896
10	Unit 1 Lesson 1 Dialogue	Audio	71,514	13,738
11	Unit 2 Lesson 2 Vocabulary	Audio	40,086	11,719
12	U7 L4 Exercise	Audio	48,745	11,326
13	Unit 1 Lesson 3 Dialogue	Audio	47,746	10,124
14	Basic teaching techniques	Written	68,394	7,215
15	Unit 6 Lesson 3 Expressions	Audio	62,904	6,003
16	Unit 1 Lesson 1 Listening	Audio	33,618	5,946
17	U2 L1 Dialogue	Audio	19,892	4857
18	Unit 1	Audio	26,869	4535
19	Unit 1 Lesson 3 Dialogue	Audio	21,308	4,042
20	Unit 2 Lesson 3 Dialogue	Audio	14550	3927
21	Forum to share an activity	Video	28,189	3680
22	Unit 2 Lesson 1 Dialogue	Audio	16,005	3220
23	Link to all textbook audio	Audio	18,007	3142
24	Unit 1 Lesson 3 Dialogue	Audio	15,785	3003
25	Unit 1 Lesson 3 Vocabulary	Audio	13,977	2,583
26	Classroom language list Part 2	Written	23,793	2,362
27	Classroom language list Part 1	Written	22,190	1,972

One striking finding from this data is that the post with fewest engagements (1,972), is higher than all but one post in the *G3 Content and Overview* category. The top 5 posts were demonstrations of how to sing a song or showed video demonstrations of a class. These posts arguably served to benefit teachers immediately. For example, a teacher must understand a song's melody to teach it to a class. Secondly, posts 2 and 4 consisted of videos created by members of the CDT to show how to teach certain activities or class

styles. Tentatively, this indicates that rather than wanting to understand the theoretical principles behind the new curriculum, teachers are more interested in practical information that they can immediately apply in their classrooms.

As outlined previously, the themes of the substantive comment threads were related to trying to understand the new methodology, the textbook language, and the new principles for language learning. The first example is a comment written under post 21 in Table 3. Extract 2 below is a translation of the post written by the FB administrator.

Extract 2: Primary English Facebook post asking for followers to show their activities.

We would like to study the activities and games being conducted in the classrooms. We would like to request a short video file with your comments/opinions towards the activity/game, [omitted]. We don't need a 40-minute video file, just the focus of the activity or the game. It will be better if you include your instructions for the activity or the game.

One teacher, Teacher A, commented on the post about doing the chain conversation. Extract 3 shows a recreation of the textbook page (MOE, 2019a, p.6) and a description of how to do the chain conversation (MOE, 2019b, p.29) in the teacher's guide. Below that is Teacher A's comment.

Extract 3: Teacher A's comments on the forum post (Post 21)

G3 Textbook Page	Teacher's Guide (Activity Explanation)
<p>Listen and say</p> <div style="display: flex; flex-wrap: wrap;"> <div style="width: 50%;"> <p>Picture artist</p> <p>Picture dentist</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;"> <p>Picture engineer</p> <p>Picture nurse</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;"> <p>Picture hairdresser</p> <p>Picture singer</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;"> <p>Picture pilot</p> <p>Picture police officer</p> </div> </div> <p>Practise</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div> <p>I want to be an artist.</p> <p>Boy</p> </div> <div> <p>I want to be a nurse.</p> <p>Girl</p> </div> </div>	<p>Chain conversation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask five students to come to the front of the class. Demonstrate the chain activity. <p>S1: I want to be an engineer. S2: I want to be a nurse. S3: I want to be an artist. S4: I want to be a police officer. S5: I want to be a singer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask other students to form into groups of 5. • Ask them to practice saying what they want to be in turn like the five students, who did the demonstration in front of the class.

Teacher A: *Today is the day I have done too much talking. Think about how many teachers have done like that??? I had all 47 students come out and talk in front of the class. Otherwise no one comes out if I ask a volunteer. Many will pretend to speak when I ask the whole class. So today I used up the reserved periods. Oh, English time! I'm very, very tired! I'm satisfied with just doing this. I have to use 3 periods for Listen & Say.*

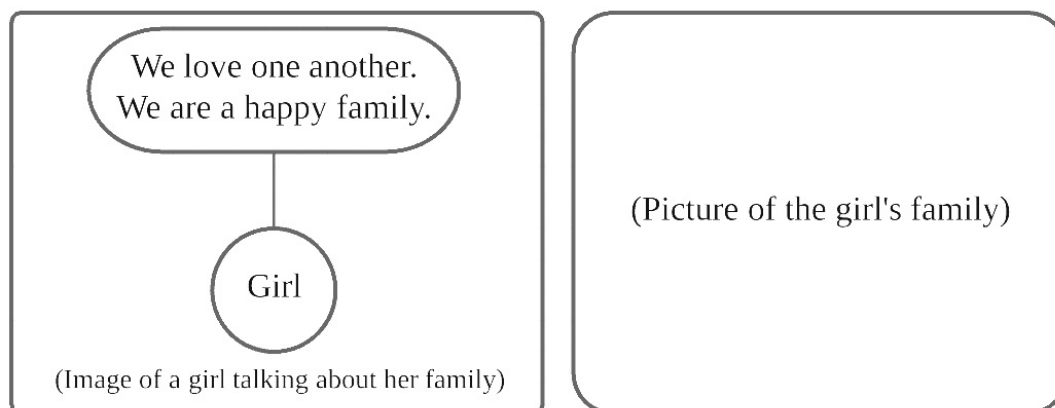
This activity was designed to be done within 10 minutes and for students, in groups, to simply say what they want to be. However, the teacher wanted all students to try so she had each group in her class of 47 demonstrate in front of the whole class. In total this took

three 40-minute periods. After this, the teacher had a follow up discussion with the page administrator. The administrator asked the teacher what she thought of the chain conversation. The teacher elaborated that some students were learning incorrect pronunciation at home which made these activities more difficult for her to do. Overall, this back-and-forth is emblematic of a larger issue: Teachers are experiencing some difficulties in doing unfamiliar textbook activities for the first time. As indicated in the talk-show television excerpt above, the teacher's guide is meant to assist teachers in carrying out activities, but arguably issues will arise that the guide cannot explain. For example, the previous English curriculum emphasized good pronunciation which teachers still feel they should enforce during language practice or communicative activities. However, doing this can lead to issues of time management and not having sufficient time to complete the stipulated textbook activities.

A second theme was teachers having to learn new language content. In some audio posts, teachers would ask questions about the language in the textbook and receive help from other teachers. The extract below shows a recreation of a section of the textbook page (MOE, 2019a, p.9) and a teacher's comment on Post 8.

Extract 4: Teacher B asks for help about language in the audio and receives it. (Post 8)

Recreation of G3 Textbook Page



Teacher B: *Friends, I'd like to know the meaning of "We love one another."*

Teacher C: *(Explains the meaning in Myanmar)*

The last comment thread is about teachers having to reconsider traditional beliefs about language teaching and learning. Extract 5 shows Teacher D, Teacher E, and the FB administrator discussing how to do a writing exercise in the G3 textbook. In the writing exercise, students had to look at pictures and use previously learned words to describe them. The extract shows the instructions and example sentences for the exercise. Words that are underlined would be substituted by students in the exercise (MOE, 2019a, p.5).

Extract 5: Teacher D asks how to conduct the exercise (Post 9)

Writing Exercise in G3 Textbook

Look at these pictures and write the sentences.

- ① This is my sister. She is beautiful.
- ② These are my friends. They are helpful.

Teacher D: *With these pictures, will the children be able to write if they don't know the meaning?*

Teacher E: *I think children can look at the pictures and can copy the sentences.*

Teacher D: *Yes, it is impossible without looking at the sentences.*

Administrator: *This exercise is to practice the 8 words in 'Listen and say'. It is alright if the students only know how to use them. Those words are shown more than once, and they will be practiced again in the Review and Project lessons so that the students are practicing them repeatedly.*

Teacher D: *Yes, thanks!*

Teacher E: *The new curriculum is good. But children cannot learn properly if teachers are teaching in the traditional way. It is difficult for the children to learn the spelling and meaning. The children get tired. I am not quite satisfied. How should I teach?*

Administrator: *Language should be taught in teaching language approach. It is also necessary to know the children's intellectual development stage.*

Teacher E: *Do we have to learn the spelling? Or to teach the children to recognize the pronunciation only? My children haven't learned systematically since G1 and G2 and it is also because of our (parents) lack of support. Now there are too many to know for my child and he/she gets tired. We have to force him/her to learn things by heart. Please suggest!*

Teacher E: *(Replies again) I just discovered this page last night and taught my child by switching on the audio. It is really supportive. Please upload more tracks for the next lessons. Thank you!*

When Teacher D mentions "the meaning" in his initial question, he means the spelling of the words. In the exercise from the G3 textbook, students are supposed to use words they had been exposed to previously to write sentences about the pictures. The words are adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'funny', 'happy', 'strong', etc. The students are expected to look at the previous page and use this previously learnt vocabulary to write the necessary sentences. However, Teacher E assumed that children would have to know how to spell the necessary words because students, in learning new vocabulary, were traditionally expected to master the spelling of all new words. At the very end of the discussion, Teacher E realizes that she can use the audio in the FB page to help her students learn the words aurally.

Discussion

The extracts above highlight some of the many challenges primary school teachers in Myanmar are facing in trying to implement the new curriculum. For many teachers the CCA advocated in the new curriculum is still unfamiliar. The changes in traditional teaching methods this new approach demands can cause consternation amongst some teachers, as evidenced in the extracts above. There is also the related issue of new teaching activities such as the chain conversation in Extract 3. Such activities are not part of the teachers' traditional repertoire of pedagogical practices. For teachers to understand, practice, and master these new activities will take time. As Extract 5 showed, teachers have established views of what constitutes 'good' or 'effective' language teaching, in this case ensuring that students know how to spell new words. The conceptual shift this requires of teachers to go from such memory-based learning to a curricular approach that emphasizes communicative meaning is no easy task. The extracts from the table of contents for the old and new G3 textbooks show just how much of a conceptual change is required.

Nor are the major required changes solely curricular. At the more basic level of language, teachers themselves will have to learn new English words and structures. Extract 4 shows how a teacher is confused by the meaning of 'We love one another'. Whether this confusion arises from the linguistic meaning of the phrase, or also arises from pragmatic and cultural appropriacy issues (or indeed, all three) is unclear, but it does highlight the challenges on many different levels facing the implementation of the new G3 curriculum.

The analysis of the Facebook posts also foregrounded the importance of time. Teachers are having to implement the new curriculum with little time for professional training. Rather, they are turning to the Facebook page as they encounter challenges or obstacles with the new textbook. Similarly, teachers also face time issues when trying to maintain the teaching schedule proposed in the teacher's guide. In Extract 3 the 'Listen and Say' activity for introducing new vocabulary, should, according to the teacher's guide, only take one 40-minute period. However, the teacher's post to the Facebook page recounted her despondency at having to use three periods to ensure that all the students got suitable practice in saying the new vocabulary. Encountering the activity for the first time, the teacher did not know the most effective method, both pedagogically and in terms of time management, to complete the 'Listen and Say' activity within the allotted 40-minute period.

Despite these challenges, the new curriculum seems to be widely welcomed. Anecdotal evidence from teachers suggest that students are especially engaged with the new emphasis on oral and aural communicative activities. Teachers too, find the new approach worthwhile in that it shifts the ultimate goal of English education from school assessment to a means of communicating with, and understanding, a wider world.

Conclusion

Myanmar is undergoing an intense period of profound educational change. This paper has examined one aspect of this change by focusing on the primary school English language curriculum. It has done this through comparing and contrasting the learning objectives and overall contents of the previous and current Grade 3 textbooks. The old textbook emphasized literacy, predominantly focusing on teaching students accurate reading and writing. In contrast, the revised textbook incorporates a communicative approach based on the use of the CEFR scales. Although this approach is more compatible with recent

global trends in language teaching, comments from teachers highlighted how it is not universally welcomed. Some teachers prefer the former established teaching methodology based on memorization and rote learning. Rather than a ‘clean break’, more research is needed in how to amalgamate both approaches in a contextually suitable methodology for primary schools in Myanmar.

What we have outlined here are the initial steps on this path as all involved continue their journey towards developing a truly contextually valid curriculum for Myanmar. The challenges and solutions outlined in this article have both policy and pedagogical implications for curriculum innovation at the primary EFL level, particularly with respect to the issues facing less economically developed countries. It is the authors’ hope that teachers and policy makers in similar circumstances can learn from and emulate such innovative curricular change.

Limitations

A broader issue with both the new and former curriculum is the suitability of teaching English as a foreign language for all children in the lower primary school level in a country as ethnically and linguistically diverse as Myanmar. For many students entering primary school English is their third language after their mother tongue and Myanmar. Fitzpatrick (2010) argues that introducing English language education could be developmentally detrimental to children who do not speak the mainstream language (in this case Myanmar) as their first language. A detailed examination of this issue in relation to the English curriculum was beyond the scope of this paper, but the authors feel that this is an important area of inquiry for language policy in Myanmar.

This paper has focused on how current, in-service teachers can help each other to understand new policy reforms through online interaction. However, teacher education colleges and universities also have a fundamental role in informing and training teachers about the policy reform. Borg *et al.* (2018) offers a useful discussion on the characteristics of a successful professional development program for teacher educators in Myanmar. Although beyond the scope of this present paper, the authors hope to address this important issue in future research on the introduction of the new curriculum and the corresponding reforms in teacher education colleges and universities.

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